
Hula and Chant

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In this brief report it will be possible to make only general observations relating to the performing arts of hula and chant. Two viewpoints that offer the basis for this commentary are "who" is committed to the task of preserving this heritage, and "what" is actually being preserved.

At the State level, it is important to acknowledge the appropriation of funds by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts (SFCA) since 1969, to the State Council on Hawaiian Heritage (SCHH) in support of island-wide hula and chant workshops. These workshops have been staffed by some of Hawaii's most outstanding kumu hula who have generously shared their mele hula teachings and methods. Attendance at these community events has numbered from 300-500 with participants of different ages representing all levels of expertise in the traditions.

Over the past decade at least nineteen workshops have been conducted, including special sessions for kumu hula. It may be emphasized here that the exclusive concern of the organizers of these workshops is to preserve traditional literature of the past century and to present recently composed literature in traditional styles. Today,

this repertory is designated "hula kahiko" and differs from its legitimate offspring, "hula 'auana" or hula sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. Participants pay a nominal fee to cover distribution of printed material, mostly chant-texts, and schedules. Presently, contact hours with the distinguished kumu hula extend over a two-day consecutive period of sixteen hours. Enrollment is open to any and all.

Two major achievements of the SCHH are reflected in the financial support and management services in preparing and sending two different hula troupes to represent Hawaii in the South Pacific Festival of Arts in Rotorua, New Zealand in 1976, and in Papua, New Guinea in 1980. Participants auditioned for their role as dancer, chanter or musician, in the 1980 event. For the 24 artists selected, at least a half-dozen halau or schools were represented and their respective kumu hula were responsible for sharing selected mele hula for the troupe's repertoire.

A direct outcome of these out-of-state encounters and cultural exchanges with other Polynesian performing groups has been the opportunity to reciprocate hospitality to visiting Maori and

Rarotongan troupes both here in Honolulu and on the island of Hawaii. Thus, the Polynesian heritage is seen in the fostering and nurturing of inter-personal relationships that linger far beyond the moments of creative expression in performance.

The King Kamehameha Celebration Commission, which, like the SFCA, is financed by the State Department of Accounting and General Services, has conducted a chant and hula competition in Honolulu for the past seven years. This opportunity has sparked tremendous enthusiasm from performing groups from all over the State. Attendance at this annual event has consistently been a sell-out affair.

The benefits derived by both performers and observers from this kind of experience include the opportunity to witness the technical virtuosity of the various halau contestants, the choreographic capabilities of the various kumu hula, and the success with which contestants satisfy the criteria used by the judges. As far as competitions are concerned, I have never been taught to regard these kinds of activities as being traditional. For music and dance presentations the idea seems to have been more in the nature of sharing and showing, ho'ike.

In former times, taunting contests were held between large families. The forfeit could be land, and/or life. Competitions today seem to follow a different set of values.

INCREASING SUPPORT

In delineating the State's role in the preservation process, attention should be focused on the Music Department of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, especially the Ethnomusicology division. Hawaiian chant and hula courses have been offered for one credit per semester since 1960. Students may choose to enroll in either applied music courses, offering private instruction, or in performing ensembles at the beginning level, the only prerequisite is that the individual be registered for letter grade or the credit/no credit

status. From humble beginnings in the early '60's to the present, the enrollment has increased to well over 100 students per semester. Students represent diverse academic fields of study as well as a multi-ethnic heritage. The curriculum is based on a system of logistics comparable to that of any other physical development study, be it ballet or piano, in order to gain an appreciation of the aesthetic, the technical, the musical, the cultural and the historical aspects of any given art form.

From the foregoing, it may be determined that the State's role in the preservation of the Polynesian heritage of hula and chant is both active and visible. Countless individuals have been privileged to see, hear, touch, taste, and enjoy these two art forms as a result of these opportunities. Of the three contexts described, however, the most enduring and endearing would be, in my opinion, the highly structured curriculum offered in the Music Department of the University. The results attained by the students follow a continuum that reflects traditional practices.

At the City & County level, Honolulu set the traditional pace some forty years ago with annual hula festivals featuring students and private halau from the community. The concept seems to have shifted from "showing" to "showcasing" in Hilo's Merrie Monarch Competition of the past twenty years. Practitioners and participants from across the State have wholeheartedly supported this event. Today, it is undoubtedly the most popular hula event whose audience has greatly expanded through commercial television.

From the Polynesian perspective, there is the feeling of inner pride that surges forth when viewing the spectacularly colorful and fantastic dancing of the competing halau. The thrill that is loudly voiced by those attending the event speaks favorably of the organizers' attempts to present the best of the best in terms of talent, precision and creativity. Hula and chant are given their full expression on Hula Kahiko night followed the next night by Hula

'Auana with singing and strumming to popular melodies and less rigid but more graceful hula gesturing. The challenge offered to participants here is the capability of addressing both performing styles.

Finally, a glimpse through the yellow pages of the phone directory reveals that hula instruction is providing a livelihood for at least thirty entrepreneurs. Depending upon whether or not the potential student chooses to study in a "hula studio," "hula school," "Halau hula," or a "hula academy," the advertisements tell us that one can indeed learn to hula from toddler's age to past centenarian. The

course content, according to the ads, ranges from ancient to modern to funky. It is now in vogue, it appears, to send a "hulagram." The Polynesian connection in these contexts might be attributed to the fact that in addition to hula, students are also privileged to study Tahitian, Maori, and Samoan dancing.

What is needed here, from these general ocomments, is really a systematic study including some field work amongst the various kumu hula throughout the State. This scientific investigation might well be the foundation for a doctoral dissertation on "preserving Hawaii's Polynesian heritage through hula and chant."